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# Called To Serve

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# CALLED TO SERVE





## STACY SAULS IS A VOICE FOR INCLUSIVENESS AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM IN THE DEEPLY DIVIDED EPISCOPAL CHURCH.



Unlike Mecca, Jerusalem, Vatican City or Canterbury, Ohio isn't synonymous with spirituality. But on an early Sunday morning last June, it was the epicenter of the 77-million-member Anglican Communion.

After celebrating the Lord's Supper (called the Eucharist) at the modern Columbus Convention Center, Episcopal Church bishops climbed onto chartered buses, vans and one stretch limousine and traveled a few blocks to Trinity Episcopal Church.

Outside, police officers shooed newspaper reporters and other gawkers away from the 19th-century house of worship, which occupies prime real estate across from the state capitol. Inside, the successors to the apostles said prayers, sang hymns and cast ballots, hoping to elect a new Presiding Bishop who could unite a deeply divided, 2.4-million-member denomination.

Most years, the Protestant conclave might have gone unnoticed in heavily Baptist Greenville, S.C. But most years, the list of candidates to be the church's leader and chief national spokesperson doesn't include a Furman University graduate.

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During Kentucky Day at the Washington National Cathedral last May, Stacy Sauls (hand raised) and members of the cathedral staff led the congregation in the celebration of Holy Communion.

The Rt. Rev. Stacy F. Sauls, bishop of Lexington, Ky., and 1977 Furman graduate, finished fifth on the initial ballot, receiving 20 of 188 votes cast. Katharine Jefferts Schori of Nevada was eventually elected on the fifth ballot.

Sauls welcomed Jefferts Schori's election, calling her "a good and faithful servant," and said that he will "do anything in my power to help Katharine, in whom I have great confidence, in this new ministry."

Sauls, who remains at his post in Lexington, is a Furman success story, but probably not the kind envisioned by the school's founders, who started the institution in 1826 to train Baptist clergy. Even Sauls' relatives were overwhelmingly Southern Baptist, with a handful of United Methodists providing diversity at family gatherings. Sauls, who discovered the Anglican liturgy as a teen-ager and fell in love with its age-old high-church rituals, was the lone Episcopalian in his household.

The young man from suburban Atlanta did not select Furman because of its religious roots. "The fact that it was associated with the Baptist church was really sort of a neutral to me. It was neither a positive nor a negative," Sauls says. "Frankly, I was looking for a small liberal arts school and I wanted to go somewhere with the best academic reputation I could get into, and that was Furman."

Sauls sought Early Admission and was accepted. "It was the right decision," he says. "I had a great experience at Furman."

He played the baritone horn in the marching band and served as a resident advisor in the dormitories. As an R.A.,

it was his duty to make sure that freshmen were studying. In the evenings, he would go from room to room to verify that textbooks were open and homework assignments were under way.

Occasionally, his charges would find creative ways to go astray. "Three guys on my hall, I think they were out stealing street signs, but they got caught and arrested and I did have to go deal with that," he says.

When he wasn't springing underclassmen from jail, Sauls says he studied almost constantly. He graduated *summa cum laude*, Phi Beta Kappa, with a degree in political science.

A Furman classmate, Paul Nix, says that Sauls always stood out. "Stacy was very bright, very compassionate, very dedicated, a person of great convictions," Nix says. "The first year at Furman, you just knew he was ahead of the pack."

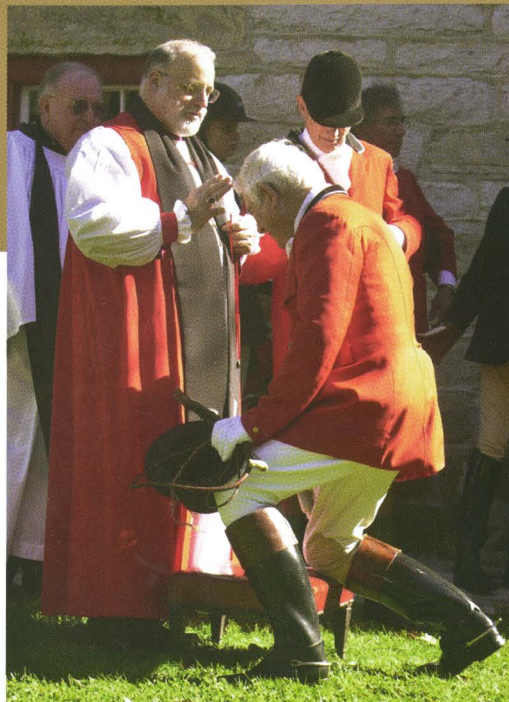
Paul Laymon '76 says he was always impressed with Sauls' integrity. "I've never known him to be dishonest or disingenuous about anything. I think he's honest through and through," Laymon says.



On Sundays Sauls attended Christ Church, an Episcopal congregation. During the week, he joined hundreds of other Furman students who volunteered with Collegiate Educational Service Corps (now Heller Service Corps), the university's community service organization.

He says he was eager to serve others. "I don't know if our kids in college think this way anymore, but I was determined to change the world," he says, adding that CESC "seemed like a good place to start." His work with CESC ended up having a profound impact on his life.

CESC's co-chair during his freshman year was a junior named Ginger Malone. An education major from Whitmire,



S.C., she donated time at the Whitten Village in Clinton, a school and home for the physically challenged. Sauls volunteered at the Boys Home of the South, a group home in Belton, and started Cub Scout programs in the inner city.

He met Ginger at a CESC leadership gathering in the spring of 1974, and soon they

were dating. At first, religion was a stumbling block.

"I sort of came kicking and screaming into the Episcopal Church, probably," says Ginger. "I not only grew up Presbyterian, but my brother was a Presbyterian minister. My dad was always a deacon and an elder."

Ginger's first visit with Sauls to an Episcopal service, during her senior year, was a failure. The future bishop, she says, "hadn't really prepared me for the ritual. He hadn't really said, 'You stand. You kneel. You do this. You do that,'" she recalls. "And we sat where I felt the whole congregation could see me. I didn't know what to do, and I was not very fond of it."

Sauls realized his blunder, Ginger says, and soon gave her a pamphlet on "Understanding the Episcopal Church."

"I pretty quickly figured out that if I was going to be part of Stacy's life, the Episcopal Church was going to be part of my life," she says.

Both Ginger and Stacy credit Betty Alverson, founder of Service Corps and now retired as director of the student center, with inspiring them to expand their world view.

"I learned at Furman, mainly from Betty Alverson, that your world was enriched and broadened by knowing all different kinds of people with all different kinds of experiences," says Ginger. "Furman really changed who I was, that's the only way to say it."

Stacy echoes Ginger's thoughts. "Furman has had a huge impact on me in many ways," he says. "I got all the tools I needed at Furman."



Left: Stacy Sauls blessed a member of the Iroquois Hunt Club during the 2002 Blessing of the Hounds in Lexington, Ky. Photo courtesy *Lexington Herald-Leader*. Below: Stacy and family, from left, Andrew, Ginger and Matthew.

Nearly three decades after Sauls' student days, Alverson still gushes about him. "I think that you're going to find that you're dealing with a fine, fine fellow," she said recently. "He's very bright, but he's very humble. He has an abiding faith that he lives by, and he's just as straightforward and honest as anyone I've ever known."



When he graduated in 1977, Stacy, by then engaged to Ginger, was uncertain about his career path. Law and the priesthood both tugged at him. Finding it hard to choose between the two vocations, he decided he would do both. He enrolled in law school

two boys from South Korea: Andrew Alverson Sauls in 1984 and Matthew in 1985. Today Andrew is a student at the University of Kentucky, and Matthew works in Lexington.

After graduating with honors from Virginia, Sauls says he was "flat tired" of taking classes. So he worked five years as an attorney in Atlanta before enrolling at New York's General Theological Seminary.

Since graduating from General with honors in 1988, Sauls has worked as a pastor in three Georgia parishes and as bishop of Lexington. Along the way, he has started numerous programs aimed at helping the poor, the sick, the elderly and the marginalized.



at the University of Virginia and made plans to attend seminary once he'd earned his law degree.

He and Ginger were married in the summer of 1979, after his second year of law school. Soon, Alverson's influence came into play again.

The Service Corps founder, an adoptive parent, had encouraged students to consider the option. "I always tried to teach them [to] have children, but adopt at least one because there's so many that need it," she says.

Stacy and Ginger took her advice to heart, adopting

At St. George's in Griffin, Ga., where Sauls was assistant rector, he helped launch a food pantry, a health clinic and an alternative school program. As rector at St. Thomas' in Savannah, he began a meals program for AIDS patients, a ministry for senior adults and a transitional housing effort. At St. Bartholomew's in Atlanta, the new rector championed after-school programs and a ministry to the burgeoning Hispanic community.

Since becoming bishop of Lexington in 2000, Sauls has started a reading camp aimed at improving literacy in

the diocese, which stretches from the suburbs of Cincinnati to hardscrabble Appalachia. He also has helped raise money for the Episcopal diocese of Haiti, a fast-growing church in the Western Hemisphere's poorest nation.

In his spare time, he is working toward yet another educational goal — a Master of Laws degree in canon law from Cardiff University in Wales.

**U**nder Sauls, the Lexington diocese grew at first, then suffered sharp drops in membership and giving. Like Episcopal dioceses across the country, Lexington has been torn by the debate over homosexuality and scripture.

After the 2003 consecration of Gene Robinson, an openly gay man with a same-sex partner, as bishop of New Hampshire, at least three of the Lexington diocese's roughly three dozen congregations split over the issue. Between 2002 and 2005 average weekly attendance dropped nearly 16 percent.

Sauls says his vote for Robinson cost him some friendships. But he believes he made the right decision.

"I hate for people to be mad at me, but I'd rather somebody else be mad at me than me be mad at me," he says. "And it was easier to deal with the loss of friends and the angry mail that came than it was to deal with having not been true to what I believe in."

He recalls how the late L.D. Johnson, chaplain at Furman during Sauls' student days, fought against racial and economic injustice — and served as a role model.

"I believe that in the Gospels all people are included in the love of God, and therefore all people ought to be included in the church," Sauls says. "I was a little bit too young to have been actively involved in the Civil Rights movement. This is my turn to be involved in something like that."

He is involved in other ways. Last year, departing Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold appointed Sauls as acting chair of the House of Bishop's ad hoc task force on property disputes — an area where Sauls' legal experience comes into play.

His job: to protect church property from being removed by congregations choosing to leave the Episcopal church and affiliate with other Anglican groups. Church law states that the dioceses hold the physical plants and other assets of each individual church for the benefit of the whole. Court battles over this issue are likely should more churches decide to change their affiliation.

Exactly how much money is at stake is unclear, but it's a staggering sum. "It's many billions of dollars," Sauls says.

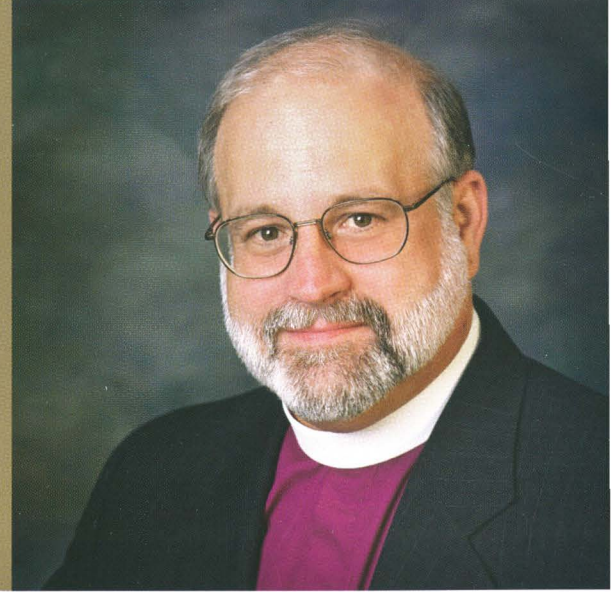
But the issue is bigger than property, according to Sauls. "The Gospel is about relationship, and you don't further the Gospel by facilitating people breaking their relationships and breaking their vows," he says.



COURTESY LEXINGTON HERALD-LEADER



In a recent address at Berea College, Sauls said, "We must break down every artificial barrier that separates people from one another." Artificial barriers — such as those of sexism, racism, homophobia and social class — "are of our own creation, not God's creation."



Sauls' commitment to outreach and inclusiveness is reflected not only in his work, but in his choice of diocesan headquarters. As bishop, he moved it from Lexington's Christ Church Cathedral to a large, beautifully restored home in a more diverse neighborhood.

"We're sitting here at Mission House in an economically disadvantaged part of Lexington, at the corner of Martin Luther King and Fourth. And the fact that we are sitting here is not without some resistance," Sauls says. "But we're sitting here because of problem solving, trying to solve problems in creative ways, and knowing that where the church needs to set itself is in the middle of people who are poor."

Despite his liberal social activism, Sauls has some critics on the left. At the Episcopal Church's 2006 general convention, he voted in favor of a resolution — aimed at preventing a split in the international Anglican Communion — that urged church leaders not to elect new bishops "whose manner of life presents a challenge to the wider church."

That vote bothered many liberal members of the denomination, but Sauls suggested it was a necessary step if the U.S. church wishes to keep the lines of communication open with the worldwide Anglican Communion. "It's not an ideal solution, but I think it's the best way forward for us at the moment to keep the conversation open and to maybe remove some barriers that are keeping all of us from doing other work that we all want to do and need to do," he says.



Sauls doesn't let criticism slow him down.

On a Sunday in late August he preached at St. Martha's, one of his diocese's most liberal parishes. As bishop, he could have ignored the day's predetermined scriptural selections, which are read at Episcopal churches across the United States. But he plunged without hesitation into Ephesians 5:21-33. The passage includes the command: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your husbands, as unto the Lord."

While he read the Bible, a woman in the front started

to hiss. She continued to heckle him until he finished reading the passage. The protest made a difficult day even harder.

Earlier, during a breakfast forum at St. Martha's, Sauls had faced tough questions about his support for the resolution discouraging the approval of additional gay bishops. In addition, a Comair jet had crashed that morning in Lexington, killing 49 people, one of them a leading local Episcopalian. Thinking about the tragedy made it hard to concentrate on the sermon, Sauls said. But he plunged ahead.

"I may be the only preacher in the whole world who is choosing to preach on that passage today, at least the only one in the Episcopal Church, except for the utterly foolhardy," Sauls told the 45 people seated before him, adding, "That is not a message that preaches well" in this day and age.

Instead of focusing on obedience, however, Sauls highlighted other parts of the passage, most notably the command: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ."

That, Sauls said, is "a radical idea," since it is not "the way the world operates now — men having power over women, people with money having power over people without, people of one race having power over another, people with strength having power over those without."

"In Christ, human relationships of all kinds are no longer expressions of power. They are expressions of love."

In an interview, Sauls said he hopes unity will ultimately prevail in the Anglican Communion. But he admits he doesn't know how the conflict will end.

"Whether things work out depends a lot on others and their willingness to continue in the conversation. I hope they'll be willing to do that," he said. "I think we've said really clearly that we want to do that, that we've made a significant sacrifice to be able to do that, and that we're serious about our relationships." <sup>1</sup>F

*The author, formerly faith and values reporter for the Lexington (Ky.) Herald-Leader, is now religion editor at the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette in Little Rock. To learn more about Sauls' work, visit the Web at [www.diolex.org](http://www.diolex.org).*